Sūrah ‘Alaq

Central Theme and Relationship with Previous Sūrah
This sūrah is the counterpart of Sūrah Tīn, the previous sūrah. There is no basic difference between the central themes of both sūrah. In the previous sūrah, it was shown through historical facts and through the perfection found in the way man has been created that the real path of salvation is that man should profess faith and do righteous deeds. People who do not adopt this path are destined to be doomed and they themselves are responsible for this fate. In the light of this premise, the Quraysh and its leaders are warned in this sūrah that instead of adopting the right path they have chosen to go on the opposite path. The Almighty has revealed His book as a favour and blessing to guide them but such is the extent of their arrogance and haughtiness that they are after the life of the very person who is trying to lead them to faith and righteous deeds. So much so, if this person offers the prayer to His God, these wretched people do not even tolerate this and try to stop him by force.

Analysis of the Sequence of Discourse

Verses (1-5): The Prophet (sws) has been directed to read out the Qur’ān to these people in the name of His Lord Who is the Creator of the whole world. Such is the exalted nature of this Book that it is incumbent upon them to follow it. The Almighty has created man from a clot of congealed blood and He also has full power to re-create him. He should read out this Book to them and remind them of the favour of the Almighty whereby He made arrangements for the education and instruction of these unlettered people through the pen and the written word and instructed them about things they did not know.

Verses (6-8): The leaders of the Quraysh are rebuked on their haughtiness that their conceit in their wealth and status have made them indifferent to God even though one day everyone shall be called to account before Him.

Verses (9-13): The haughty who would stop the Prophet (sws) from praying are especially warned and threatened. In a very angry tone, they are asked that if this servant of God is rightly guided or is telling something related to piety and these rebellious people are rejecting him and showing indifference to him, then …! The implication is that such
people should fully contemplate what their fate would be.

**Verses (14-18):** More rage and fury is expressed at the attitude of these rebellious people. They are rebuked on this behavior. Are they not in their senses that the Almighty is observing all their impertinent activities? If they will not refrain from their insolence, a Day is fast approaching when He shall drag these wretched and errant people by their forelocks.

**Verse (19):** The Prophet (sws) is urged to show perseverance and forbearance and to disregard the pranks of these rebellious people. He should prostrate and become close to the Almighty.

**Text and Translation**


In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Read in the name of your Lord Who created – created man from a clot of congealed blood. Read and your Lord is the most Bounteous Who taught by the pen. He taught man what he knew not. (1-5)

Certainly not! Indeed, man is being rebellious considering himself to be self-sufficient. Indeed, to His Lord is the return. (7-8)

Just look at him who forbids a servant when he prays. Just consider if this person is rightly guided or urges others to virtue ... ! Just see if this person denied and turned away ... ! Does he not know that Allah is observing? (9-14)

Certainly not! If he does not desist, We shall drag him by the forelock, a lying, sinful forelock. Then let him call his faction. We shall summon Our guards. (15-18)

Certainly not! Do not obey him and bow down in prostration and draw near. (19)
The word اقرأُ يَأْسِمُ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ (1) is not merely used to convey what a teacher would say to a student in order to ask him to read. It is also used to ask others to read the way it is in (read it out to people and recite it out to people). This usage is found at many places in the Qurʾān. For example, while addressing the disbelievers who would cause a hindrance at the Qurʾān being read out to them, it is said:

وَإِذَا قُرِىَ الْقُرْآنُ قَامَتْ عَيْنَاهُ وَأَنْصَبْتُوا لَعْلَمُ حَسْمَهُ رَخَّصُونَ (7:40)

And when the Qurʾān is recited out, listen to it in silence so that you may be shown mercy. (7:204)

At another place, the words are:

وَإِذَا قُرِىَ الْقُرْآنُ جَعَلْنَا بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ حِجَابًا مَّسْتَوْرًا (17:45)

And when you recite out the Qurʾān, We place between you and those who deny the life to come a hidden barrier. (17:45)

The indication to this usage is present within the verses. The expression يَأْسِمُ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ directs the Prophet (sws) to read out the Qurʾān in the name of his Lord Who is the creator of all the world. This is a very important warning. The Prophet (sws) should present this Qurʾān as a directive from God which must necessarily be followed so that they know that what is being recited out to them is directly from God. These are not the words of some preacher nor of any other person. It is also not a request which can be turned down. It is in fact the word of the God Who has the right to give orders to His creation and it is the obligation of the people to obey it without the slightest of hesitation. They should not dare evade it or make fun of it or oppose it while considering it to be something trivial.

It should be kept in consideration that the Qurʾān is the word of God. No other Book before it has the honour to be entirely composed of the words revealed by God. For this reason, the Prophet (sws) has been directed to present it in the name of His Lord so that people are able to gauge its real exaltedness and they should not let themselves become a target of God’s wrath by opposing it. It has been mentioned in the predictions recorded in previous divine scriptures about the advent of Muḥammad (sws) that

1. Read in the name of your Lord Who created.
whatever he will say, he will say in the name of God and the Almighty will take revenge from those people who will reject what is said to them in His name.² It is as if these words not only convey the exaltedness of the Qur’ān, they also warn the Quraysh that if they want to oppose it they must deeply contemplate the fate of this attitude of theirs.

3. Created man from a clot of congealed blood.

2. Reference is to the following words of the Old Testament:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to My words that the prophet speaks in My name, I myself will call him to account. (Deuteronomy, 18:18)
of congealed blood is fully capable of re-creating him and then calling him to account.

4. Read and your Lord is the most Bounteous Who taught by the pen.
5. He taught man what he knew not.
the unlettered Arabs, therefore, this word is primarily spoken for them. It was the special favour of the Almighty that He led them out of the darkness of ignorance by revealing to them this complete guidance. It is now their obligation to value and honour it. In Sūrah Jumu‘ah, this aspect is discussed in the following words:

اَنْ رَأَى اسْتَغْفِرَ (٧) إِنَّ إِلَى رَبِّكَ الْرَّجُعُ (٨)

This verse depicts the behaviour of the Arabs which they adopted with this guidance of God: instead of duly honouring it, they are rejecting it out of sheer arrogance; the reason for this is that their wealth and resources have made them indifferent to God.

This verse begins with the emphatic negative particle َّلَا (certainly not). It is meant to negate the excuses the Quraysh would make in rejecting the Qur’ān and the Prophet (sws). These excuses fabricated by them are meant to cover up the reality. The real reason of their rejection was considering themselves self-sufficient from God and their love for this world. However, they would pretend as if they had certain objections for which they were not receiving satisfactory answers.

6. Certainly not! Indeed man is being rebellious considering himself to be self-sufficient.
7. Indeed, to His Lord is the return.
The implication is that the Prophet (sws) should let them do what they are doing. Finally, they will have to return to their Lord to whom they have become indifferent and fearless. At that time, they will come to know the fate of their arrogance. If they think that their alleged deities will be their saviours and Lords, then they will come to know how baseless their view is. On that Day, only God will reign supreme and no one else will be able to save a person from His grasp.

أُرَآَيْتُ الَّذِي يَنْفِقُ (9) عَبْدًا إِذًا ضُلِّيّ (10)

Mentioned in this verse is an example of their rebellious attitude referred to earlier. The heard-hearts among the Quraysh are alluded to here who would stop the Prophet (sws) and other Muslims from praying. The foremost obligation of a person towards his Lord is serving and worshipping Him and the foremost manifestation of worship is the prayer. Thus a person in praying is discharging his foremost obligation towards his Lord and is worthy of being shown respect for this deed. He should be regarded as someone worth following in this matter. If someone is audacious enough to stop him in this regard, then this would mean that he is stopping someone from discharging his foremost obligation towards God.

We have explained at various places in this *tafsīr* that the style أُرَآَيْتُ is used to direct the attention of people to something very inappropriate or to criticize someone. Expressions such as “just look at him”, “have you seen him” and “take a look at what he is doing” are its equivalents in the English language.

It is not necessary that a specific person be considered to be implied by the word الَّذِي. It can be used to portray people who indulge in such unworthy activity. We have already explained this style in this *tafsīr*. It was not Abū Jahl only who would stop the Prophet (sws) from praying; there were other ruffians besides him too who would do so and these ruffians would not stop the Prophet (sws) only from praying; they would stop other servants of God also from praying.

أُرَآَيْتُ إِنَّ كَانَ عَلَى الْهَدَايَةِ (11) أُوْلَىٰ أُمْرًا بِالْمُتَّقُوْيِ (12)

The implication is that before taking this foolish step, the person should have thought that in his frenzy against Islam, he should not have become so overcome as to not even contemplate the fate that he will meet. Is not there a chance that this servant of God is on the right path and with his

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8. Just see him who forbids a servant when he prays.
9. Just consider if this person is rightly guided or urges [others] to virtue … !
words and deeds calls others to piety and virtue? Will disregarding this possibility, this person would then be merely inviting the wrath of God. In other words, on what basis does he regard this frenzied step of his to be correct – a step which can only be taken by Satan.

\[10\] أَرَأَيْتَ إِنَّ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى١٣ (١٣)

This is a reference to the second possibility we have referred to above: what if this person was the one who denied and who turned away, then …! The implication is that in this case it would be he who would be responsible for opening the door to Hell. Here, an ellipsis of the overall apodosis has occurred to point to the fact that its severity is beyond words – a common style of classical Arabic. An example of such an ellipsis can also be seen in Sūrah Yūnus.

The fate of the people who reject the Prophet (sws) and turn away from his call is mentioned thus in Sūrah Layl:

لا يَضَلَّلَهَا إِلَّا الأَشْقَائِيُّ الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى١٥ (١٥-١٦)

Only those wretched creatures shall enter Hell who denied and turned away. (92:15-16)

\[11\] أَلَمْ يَعَلَّمَ يَأْنِي اللَّهُ يَرِى١٦(١٦)

The implication of this verse is that does such a person not realize that the Almighty is watching all his unrestrained behaviour. Now if He is and surely He is, then He will definitely take its revenge. He is just, merciful, powerful and has a great sense of honour. If His servants are stopped from worshipping Him, how can he tolerate this as a bystander.

\[12\] كَلَّا لَنْ يَصِلَّ لِهِمْ نِتْنَةٌ لِئِسْفَعَ بِالْبَيْنِ١٥ (١٥)

This verse sounds a severe warning to such arrogant people. The word ِِسْفَعَ means to drag something by grabbing it in the fist. In Sūrah Raḥmān, the fate of such people is mentioned thus:

فَيُؤْخَذُ بِالْبَيْنِ وَ الْأَقْدَامَ١٤ (٤١)

(Then they shall be grasped by their forelocks and legs and thrown in Hell. (55:41).

10. Just see if this person denied and turned away … !
11. Does he not know that Allah is observing [him]?
12. Certainly not! If he does not desist, We shall drag him by the forelock.
The word سُراح ‘Alaq is a permutative (بدل) of the ناصِبية of the previous verse. Though the former is not defined by the article alif lām and the latter is, yet such a grammatical interpretation is possible because the ناصِبية of this verse is defined by an adjective and such a noun can technically be regarded as a permutative (بدل) of a noun defined by the article alif lām.

The anger and rage which seems to be exuding from every word of this verse is worth noting. The forelocks of such ruffians are mentioned in very harsh words. The face and forehead is the most honourable part of body and for this reason, at times, signifies the whole personality of a person as is the case here. Also the greatest honour for a forehead is the mark of prostration that becomes stamped on it. If a person is so callous that not only he himself does not prostrate before God, but also stops others from prostrating before Him, then such a wretched person is worthy of being grabbed by the forelock and thrown in Hell.

فَلِيُدْعِعْ نَادِيَهُ (١٧) سُنَدْعَ الزَّبَانِيَةُ (١٨)

This is a challenge thrown to these arrogant people. If they are bigheaded about their power, then they should call all their allies and the Almighty will call His guards and see how much power they have. The first practical test of this challenge in the later period was in the battlefield of Badr and the world witnessed that the whole power and collectivity of the Quraysh was humiliated at the hands of the Almighty’s guards.

The real meaning of the word نادي is “a gathering”, “a society”. Here, in this verse, it refers to individuals who are associated together in some communal relationship. Keeping in view the context, it can be translated as “group” and “party”.

The word رَبَيْنة is the plural of رَبِيَّة and its real meaning is “defender”; however, it is also used for policemen and law enforcing personnel. It has been translated as “guards” keeping in view the context. In other words, this is a divine task force of angels which is sent for special missions which are temporary in nature.

كَلَّا لَا مُطْعَةٌ وَأَسْجَدُ وَأَفْتَرَبُ (١٩)

These words sound assurance to the Prophet (sws): if someone is

14. Then let him call his faction. We shall summon Our guards.
15. Certainly not! Do not obey him and bow down in prostration and draw near.
stopping him from prostrating before God, just ignore him and draw nearer the Almighty by prostrating before Him. It should be kept in mind that at many places the Qur’ān has regarded the prayer as the key to perseverance and resolve and to earning His help. The most grand component of the prayer is prostration. This is an allusion to the fact that who would dare stop the Prophet (sws) from something which is the objective of his life and the sole means of his relationship with God. If any one does dare to do such a thing, he should seek refuge with the Almighty. The only way to do this is to prostrate before Him.

Period of Revelation of the Sūrah

This brings us to the end of the explanation of this sūrah. Let us now deliberate on its period of revelation by analyzing its contents. The most helpful thing in determining the period of revelation of a sūrah is to deliberate on its tone, address and style of address. For this very reason, I have raised this question at the end of the explanation instead of discussing it in the introductory part of the sūrah. Readers can form an opinion for themselves on this issue about which our exegetes have different opinions.

The most famous opinion on the period of revelation of this sūrah is that it is the first revealed sūrah of the Qur’ān. Some people regard the whole sūrah as the first revelation of the Qur’ān, but the majority regards its first five verses to be the first revelation of the Qur’ān. This latter opinion is based on a narrative in Bukhārī and Muslim.

The second opinion is that of Zamakhsharī. He has recorded in his tafsīr: وأكثر المفسرين على أن الفاتحة أول ما نزل ثم سورة القلم (And most exegetes are of the view that Sūrah Fātiḥah was revealed the foremost and then Sūrah Qalam).16 Some exegetes have differed with this opinion and some have accepted it.

A third opinion on this issue is that Sūrah Muddaththir was revealed the foremost. The proponents of this view most probably regard its initial verses only as the first revelation because the tone of the rest of the sūrah and its style of address is so stern and severe like Sūrah ‘Alaq that it is very difficult to regard the whole sūrah as the first revelation.

In my opinion, Sūrah ‘Alaq is a harmonious whole and a single well-knit unit. The tone of its first five verses is no different from that of the rest of the sūrah. Such is the severity in its style of address that one fails to understand that why should such a sūrah be regarded as the first revelation. Moreover, there is no indication within the sūrah to regard it

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to have been revealed in two episodes. God knows best. This is my opinion and gratitude be to Him.

Lahore,
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